

Kites thousands of years in the making

Published Saturday August 14th, 2010

Kite maker recounts the evolution of the kite

been a kite maker for 20 years, Karl Longbottom knows a thing or two about the history of his own creations.



VIKTOR PIVOVAROV/TIMES & TRANSCR

Karl Longbottom gets set to fly his rokkaku kite during Dieppe Kite International at Dover Park yesterday afternoon.

"Kites actually started out as fishing lines," explains the British participant at the Dieppe Kite International. "People would attach leaves at one end of the string, and bait at the other. It enabled them to catch fish without the danger of drowning."

Of course, this was thousands of years ago. It would be the Chinese and their invention of paper that would bring about the kite form that we all know and fly today.

"Using paper, the Chinese made kites with bamboo for the frames," says Longbottom, noting that Asia remains today the most popular region for kite flying. "The Chinese mainly made and flown the kites for pleasure. They were now fairly well-off and developed that they could dedicate themselves to other pursuits."

But how did kites eventually get to us?

"It's believed that kites made their way to Western civilization through the trade routes of the 1700s," states Longbottom. "And a little later on, they made it to North America as this area began to be colonized."

Today, the veteran kite maker and flyer concedes that kites remain above all a source of leisure.

"It's really all about self-gratification," he mentions. "There have been stories of kites being used to transport people on rooftops and things like that, but there's never been any proof to confirm those tales."

Having already travelled to four different continents this year for kite events, Karl Longbottom explains that one region in particular where kite flying is actually less prevalent is Africa.

"I think it all goes back to the theory of being well-off enough to reach that stage where you can dedicate yourself a little more to pursuits. And this is less the case in Africa,"

A multi-million dollar industry, kites are now produced on a much larger scale than they were millennia ago. But as Longbottom is quick to indicate, the bulk of kites found throughout the world today are still produced, alongside a whole lot of other products, in their land of origin: China.